

Lesson
9

Busy, not
Busybodies

After a program we're watching on television is interrupted by a special report, we're used to hearing the announcement, "And now, back to our regularly scheduled programming." Trusting and waiting for Jesus feels like our regularly scheduled programming. Should it?

2 Thessalonians 3:1–18

Pray for Us

3 Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, ²and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. ³But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. ⁴And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command. ⁵May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

Warning Against Idleness

⁶Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. ⁷For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, ⁸nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. ⁹It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. ¹⁰For even when we were with you, we would give you this command:

If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. ¹¹For we hear that some among

Key Verse

"As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good"
(2 Thess. 3:13).

you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. ¹²Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

¹³As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. ¹⁴If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. ¹⁵Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

Benediction

¹⁶Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all.

¹⁷I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write. ¹⁸The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

Go Deeper

Besides the Parable of the Ten Virgins, Jesus told two others that parallel the practical teaching Paul gave to the Thessalonians: The Parable of the Traveling Owner (Mark 13:34–37) and the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Servants

(Matt. 24:45–51; Luke 12:42–48). Several themes can be seen in each of these stories. The unexpected return of the central character was Jesus' main point, but the state of those he surprised holds a good point of application for us.

(continued)

Go Deeper Continued . . .

Everyone in these parables is surprised, but the surprise turns out well for some and not so well for others.

Before the Parable of the Traveling Owner, Jesus briefly explained His meaning: “Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come” (Mark 13:33). A man goes on a journey and leaves his servants to tend his home and await his return. He is not required to tell them ahead of time when he will come back. He expects them to be ready for him at any time. What would displease the master is to find his servants asleep. This is not about Jesus forbidding His disciples from getting a good night’s sleep. If the house, the servants, and the duties are metaphorical, so is the sleep. We are not to be sleepwalking or sleep-living when Jesus returns. He expects us rested, healthy and busy for Him—never busybodies.

The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Servants (Luke 12:42–48) has a similar point with different details. Here the servant isn’t sleeping but busy doing wrong. The servant assumes the delay means the master will not come anytime soon. But just because the Master hasn’t returned doesn’t mean the Master is oblivious to the servant’s actions. Being caught by the Lord doing nothing or doing evil will lead to an unhappy ending. There’s only one way to fix this: “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up” (Gal. 6:7–9).

Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians closed with a simple request, “Brothers, pray for us” (1 Thess. 5:25). He began that letter with prayer for them and ended by expressing his need for prayer from them. This is a pattern he maintained in almost all his letters. In this second letter, Paul made the same request, but he gave them some direction about how to pray. He wanted them to pray for his message and his mission—that the message they had heard from him would have the same effect in new places, and that he and his team would be protected from their adversaries.

After that pause for prayer, Paul again plunged into the specifics of the active waiting aspects of the Christian life. He reminded them we live and move in a world where “not all have faith” (2 Thess. 3:2), which makes it all the more important that we never lose sight of the fact that

“the Lord is faithful” (v. 3). Verses 3–5 form a brief description of Paul’s confidence in God concerning the Thessalonians. Ultimately, Paul knew his friends were in God’s care.

From verses 6 to 15, Paul takes care of what we might call spiritual house rules. The love he expected the Thessalonians to shower on one another needed to be tempered with a toughness that emphasized personal responsibility. Believers were not to presume on one another’s generosity. Paul pointed to his own example among them. He had not taken advantage of them. He hadn’t been idle, nor had he eaten “anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you” (v. 8). Verse 9 tells us he knew he could have expected their hospitality and support in response to his work of sharing the Gospel and teaching them, but he wanted to give them an example.

Based on his example Paul could say, “For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat” (v. 10). This may sound harsh at first, but Paul is not talking about ability here. Someone who is genuinely unable to work should not be allowed to go hungry, and such are the situations that allow believers to meet one another’s needs. In 2 Thessalonians 3:10 Paul is addressing a problem. He had heard that there were some who were acting like parasites on the Body of Christ. They were taking at will without making any contribution to the whole. In the context of this letter, they could have been people who thought the coming of the Lord was so close that they could coast in every way. Paul firmly confronted and condemned that attitude of entitlement. Waiting expectantly for Christ didn’t mean not working in the meantime!

So how do we wait for the coming of the Lord to receive us to Himself? First of all, we keep busy for the Lord. We don’t sell our house and go to a mountaintop to sit cross-legged in meditation. We don’t join a little club someplace, where there are only 60 members and hole up expecting to disappear one day. That’s not God’s plan. That’s not a healthy way to live in expectation of what Christ will do at the proper time. Paul clearly says in verses 10–12, “Get a job; contribute in the work force; get back in the church; get back to doing

what you always did.” Then he says to those who hadn’t given up their jobs, “As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good” (v. 13). In other words, “Hang in there. Keep watching and working because, after all, either the Lord will come back and take us to Himself, or, after whatever time the Lord has allotted to us, we will be taken from this life and meet Him in the air.”

Verse 11 includes a great little play on words that can give us a guiding motto: busy at work, not busybodies; busy doing what God wants us to do, not busy doing nothing or what the Lord doesn’t want us to do. Jesus told a parable about ten virgins who were excitedly waiting for the bridegroom to arrive (Matt. 25:1–13). But five of them were prepared for the wait and brought extra oil while the other five ran out. When the shortsighted rushed to try to find more oil, the bridegroom arrived, and they missed him. Foresight and added labor by the five wise virgins were required in order to keep their lamps lit for the groom’s arrival. Jesus summarized that parable with this statement: “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour” (Matt. 25:13). The apostle Paul gave the Thessalonians and us his own version of that same message. We don’t want to become weary doing the good it takes to keep the supply of oil in the lamp so that the world can see our light!

Express It

Prayer is certainly part of active waiting. It keeps the line of communication open between God and us. He speaks continuously through His Word and His Spirit in us. Our responses are somewhat less constant, but they can always improve. Take some time to talk to God about your feelings and struggles as you wait for His return.

Consider It

As you read 2 Thessalonians 3:1–18, consider these questions:

1) Which of Paul’s two prayer requests strikes you as the most personal? Why?

2) What does Paul trust God to do to maintain the safety of the Thessalonians?

3) What are the command and the conditions that Paul lays down about the treatment of those who are “walking in idleness” (v. 6)?

4) How would you describe Paul’s idea of a healthy community of believers?

5) Why was it important for Paul to set a high standard of personal behavior when he was with the Thessalonians?

6) How does this chapter challenge some of your assumptions and philosophy about work and relating to other Christians?

7) What effect does Paul’s closing benediction (vv. 16–18) create in you as you think of him writing this to someone like you?
